

We all have an ethnic identity

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In response to a helpful piece by RCW on loving our ethnic neighbour Joseph Paul Cadariu asks whether we "have to separate "ethnic" neighbors from whatever "non-ethnic" neighbors may be." I would contend that there is no such thing as a non-ethnic neighbour. Ethnic identity is not something that "minorities" or "indigenous peoples" etc have but something that we all have. The difference between us is in our consciousness of our identity and as a general rule the bigger and more powerful an identity is the less conscious its members are of their identity. It seems that the bigger and more powerful an ethnic identity is the less conscious it is of its identity and the more oppressive it is of less powerful ethnicities. I would contend, in this context, that the USA is the most powerful and potentially the most oppressive ethnic identity on earth today.

In my book on ethnic identity, which I hope will be re-published for the Cape Town Congress with the title of *Ethnic Identity from the Margins: a Christian Perspective*, I wrote the following about the ethnic identity of the USA:

"The USA is the state that has witnessed the greatest mixing of ethnic identities in modern times so it is impossible to talk about such mixing without saying something about its unique experience. Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, first performed in New York in 1908, expresses the idea that an "American" is the result of the fusion of many identities but the truth is that for most of its history the official policy of the state has been the assimilation of all its people into a dominant white, English culture. The Declaration of Independence may have proclaimed the equality of all men and the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all but in reality those blessings were only available within the framework of an English state. Native Americans were granted none of these rights because they refused to be assimilated into the white English state. Even the strong desire of large immigrant groups, such as the Germans in the nineteenth century, to retain their identity was treated with suspicion and eventually totally scuppered." [*Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001, p. 145].

Ethnic identity is made up of a common proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, elements of a common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity. Think American? the Pilgrim fathers? the Declaration of Independence? the 50 States? loyalty to the flag? I want to appeal to brothers and sisters from all the big and powerful ethnicities to appreciate that they have an ethnic identity and to begin to understand how their identity impacts those with smaller and less powerful identities. I see no hope of real harmony unless this is done.